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ABSTRACT

In the 1998-99 program year, 10 tutors recruited by The Literacy Council of Lancaster-Lebanon, LVA (Literacy Volunteers of America), were encouraged to use the AIM (Assessment, Instruction, Mastery) program to plan lessons and give instruction to students at the lowest literacy level. Only two tutors completed worksheets. Interventions were planned for the other eight tutors. Four AIM tutors were matched with two mentors (two tutors per mentor) to analyze the tutoring and compliance to the structure through use of a mentor. These tutors were compared to four AIM tutors who had no mentor. Two additional modules were created for AIM tutors to provide more assistance in interpreting AIM worksheets. Mentors used mentor journals that were reviewed with the researchers twice during the year to highlight issues and challenges of being a mentor. Results indicated all four mentored tutors used AIM with their low-level students, as opposed to only one tutor in the un-mentored control group); the tutors used the tools to instruct and measure mastery of skills; they complied with the reporting requirements and used the skill sheets to track progress; and all students made progress as reflected on the AIM worksheets. Use of a mentor increased the correct use of the AIM program. (YLB)

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PENNSYLVANIA ACTION RESEARCH NETWORK
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Monograph Title:

Strategies to Encourage Volunteer Tutors to Utilize AIM to Improve Instruction

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PRODUCT

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Staff Development Through
Six Professional Development Centers"

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Project Director
Dr. Gary Kuhne
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Pennsylvania Action Research Monograph

Note: Action Research is a process of systematic inquiry credited to Kurt Lewin who popularized it in the U.S. in the 1940"s. Today it is considered a system of qualitative research. Typical of action research, none of the individual projects in this monograph series claims to have generalizable application beyond the specific project described. However, each monograph report can serve to be illustrative, instructive and provides the potential for replication in other locations. For a level of generalizability, it is recommended that the reader seek common patterns in the monograph reports in this series, and the wider literature, or contact the Action Research Network for assistance in this.

ABSTRACT

The problem is the volunteer tutors who have agreed to use AIM (Assessment, Instruction, Mastery) program are not using the tool to design instruction and measure progress with their students. This program was developed by adult education in Oregon State and has been introduced through a project of the Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council. Before the Literacy Council commits to expanding the use of AIM, we want to determine why volunteers don't use the tool and find ways to help them work with the tool more effectively.

The organization provides volunteer tutors to over 300 annually. In the 98/99 program year, ten tutors were encouraged to use AIM to plan lessons and give instruction to students at the lowest literacy level. Only two tutors completed worksheets. The other eight tutors did not appear to be using AIM and were not completing the reporting information.

This year we matched four AIM tutors with two mentors (2 tutors/mentor) to analyze the tutoring and compliance to the structure through use of a mentor. These tutors were compared to AIM tutors who had no mentor.

Data collection methods used included: focus groups; journal log; student achievements reflected on AIM worksheets.

Results: Four AIM tutors were matched with volunteer mentors. All four tutors were retained through the program year, and all four tutors used AIM with their low-level students. The tutors used the tools to instruct and measure mastery of skills. They complied with the reporting requirements and used the skill sheets to track progress. All students made progress as reflected on the AIM worksheets. We believe the use of mentors gave these tutors the extra support and guidance they needed to use the AIM program to tutor their adult literacy students.

I. PROBLEM

This proposal involves The Literacy Council of Lancaster-Lebanon, LVA, a community-based organization serving a two- county area. The council exists to help adults improve their basic, reading, writing, and math skills (0-5 grade levels) Volunteer tutors who the council recruits and trains deliver the instructional services in our basic literacy program. The staff of the council has the role of recruiting students and matching them with the tutors. The council believes it is very important for volunteers to be well trained and to be provided with the tools to help them meet the

needs of the individual students.

During the past two years, the staff has been working as part of a pilot project from the Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council called Project AIM (Assessment, Instruction, Mastery). The project provides a list of skills to be learned and the corresponding evidence to show the mastery of those skills. This information is provided in a worksheet format produced by the AIM developers. The skill list is to help tutors and students plan lessons, assess progress, and provide feedback to the council. Our program improvement team decided to pilot AIM because we were receiving feedback from tutors that they needed more help with lessons and achieving goals and competencies, linked to literacy. The challenge is tutors who have volunteered to use the AIM tool are not using the tool to design instruction and measure progress with their students. Out of ten tutors who volunteered for the project, only two implemented it. These two tutors found it very effective in solving instructional problems and in providing feedback that was important to them as tutors and students. We believe the tool is very valuable and more tutor/student pairs could benefit from use of AIM. Before the Literacy Council commits to expanding the use of AIM, we want to determine why they don't use the tool and find support to help them work with the tool more effectively.

To determine the cause of the problem, we spoke to tutors and the information we received included: unsure how to use tool; problems attending training sessions; students didn't seem interested; and didn't fill out form.

The format of the data form for tutors to use may be visually confusing or intimidating. Since staff monitors the AIM project, perhaps this affects the rapidity of follow-up with tutors using the tool.

If tutors utilize the AIM tool, we believe it will help students achieve measurable goals that they have chosen. This will assist the program in measuring goals that students have achieved and provide information for program effectiveness and design.

By solving this problem, we will improve tutor effectiveness with the students and be able to provide feedback to supporters, tutors, and students.

II. PLANNING

We planned to use the following interventions:

- Focus two of the tutor newsletters on using AIM and how this can help students and tutors in their work together.
- Recruit two AIM tutors who have used AIM to act as mentors to four tutors to help them work with AIM.
- Modify AIM worksheets to make the instructions and format more visually interesting.

Timeframe:

September -	Develop job description for tutor mentors
	Recruit tutor mentors
	Enlist aid of public relations chair to conduct focus group
	Work with program improvement team on making simple modifications to AIM worksheets.
October -	Distribute materials
	Match mentors with tutors
	Monitor activity through simple mentor logs
November-	Train replacement tutors for volunteers who have left
	Rematch any tutors/students who are part of this study and one party leaves
	Produce newsletter focused on AIM and distribute
December-	Meet with mentors to determine what is working and what is not
April-	Begin reviewing data and writing monograph
May-	Submit report

I planned to use the already existing tutor newsletter to disseminate information. The editor of the newsletter helped plan the specialty newsletters.

To create a mentor program for AIM, I enlisted the assistance of the two tutors who had worked successfully with this tool. It was key that they understood the role of mentor and what feedback would be necessary.

It was our plan to use several tools to collect data for this project. They were: focus group, mentor journals, and AIM worksheets.

The baseline was established as the program year 1998-99 when the AIM project was implemented. During that time only two or 20% of the tutors introduced to AIM used the tool. This baseline was compared to the work and to the compliance of tutors who had an AIM mentor during

program year 99-00. We were also able to have a control group of tutors who were using AIM in the current year, but who had no additional support.

Success was determined by comparing the effects of a mentor on likelihood of tutors to actively use AIM as a tool to design student instruction and measure progress. It has been decided that if three of the four mentored tutors used AIM and followed through with reporting that the mentor program had been a success.

Constraints:

- We were uncertain if AIM tutors would be willing to act as mentors;
- Tutors could stop tutoring at any time and results would be skewed;
- Students could "dropout" and additional time would be needed to find replacements;

As executive director, I have the authority to sanction such program research. Since the names of tutors and students will not be divulged, no individual approval was needed.

The problem I was trying to answer was, "Will the use of a mentor help tutors using the AIM program utilize this tool to the benefit of their instruction."

III. ACTION

The intervention steps we used were:

- Mailing of specialized modules on using AIM and the AIM overview to all tutors whom would use the AIM program. We had determined in the focus group that tutors needed a more substantial piece after training. The focus group believed the newsletters wouldn't add that much, but a more substantial module would provide reinforcement. They felt it could be a self-directed piece which tutors could study at their leisure.
- Recruitment of two tutors mentors who would work with two tutors each. These were strictly tutors using the AIM program with low-level literacy adult students. We had targeted two tutor mentors, but actually enlisted the help of three in case we lost a mentor.
- The AIM worksheets were modified not in content (since this is a copyrighted program), but in layout and spacing on the page. We also referenced sheets to the training manual.

Our plan was to use the modified sheets and the modules with all the AIM tutors and provide a mentor to four of the tutors using AIM. Thus the control group became the tutors

who did not have a mentor?

We modified our timeline to meet the needs of our mentors and revised intervention:

August-	Developed job description for tutor mentors
	Recruited tutor mentors
	Enlisted aid of public relations chair to conduct focus group
	Worked with program improvement team on making simple modifications to AIM worksheets
September-	Distributed materials
	Matched mentors with tutors
	Monitored activity through mentor logs
November-	Rematched any students or tutors who were part of this study
	Produced modules regarding AIM and distributed to tutors
December	Met with mentors to determine effectiveness of mentoring system
February	Touch base with mentors to provide follow-up and support for their efforts
May	Reviewed data
	Followed up with mentors to clarify contacts and issues
	Wrote monograph
	Submitted report

There had been a training manual created for training AIM tutors. During the focus groups we learned that tutors felt they needed some additional support after training. It was their opinion that mentors would fulfill this need. They didn't like the idea of a newsletter dedicated to AIM. They felt their needs for materials were greater than this and they suggested using the training as a touchstone for additional help. With this in mind, the program improvement team created two modules to be used after the training to provide additional support to volunteer tutors.

To create the mentor system, we enlisted the help of two tutors who had been active with the organization for at least two years. They had successfully used this tool with their students. We gave them a job description for mentor and asked them how they felt this should be implemented. We used their suggestions in gathering information about progress and problems with AIM. We also asked them to keep mentor journals that recorded their thoughts and positive as well as negative issues that kept coming up.

The project's biggest constraint was finding volunteer tutors who were willing to take on the extra work of mentoring. We had two persons targeted and then had to reassess what we would do if we lost a volunteer. It took two weeks to convince three mentors that this would be a project, which would be interesting, enjoyable, and provide real value to the work of the literacy council.

This of course would be one of the biggest constraints in a volunteer organization that wanted to expand the idea of mentors. It is not impossible, but it takes a great deal of upfront work and support to create a mentoring system. An agency would need to weigh the value of such use of resources.

There is also the issue of turnover of volunteers and students in general. Often matches just begin and need to be reassigned because one of the parties leaves. However, if mentoring is really effective and it helps students gain the skills they need using the AIM model, students may stay longer for instruction.

If a tutor who has been asked to use AIM were unable to continue as a tutor, this would require our program to quickly train a new tutor on how to use AIM. This would mean more staff time dedicated to training, but I do think this constraint could be overcome.

The most likely constraint that will occur is a student separating early from the program. It wouldn't create too much disruption as long as his or her tutor is willing to be rematched with another student. The tutor could utilize experience by using AIM with the new student. They will need to begin keeping a new record for this student.

The problems were minimal for this project because we kept focused on tutors and mentoring. Once we recruited the tutor mentors, the tutor mentors encountered the major problem. They experienced great difficulty in reaching the volunteer tutors and getting them to return calls.

The return of the AIM worksheets went rather smoothly with only one tutor in the group not completing the work and failing to follow-up with the mentor. We were unable to get any feedback from them regarding why they were unwilling to comply.

The project also lost a volunteer tutor, who had to leave because of relocation of job. We had another AIM tutor available immediately, so the student only lost about two weeks of work using AIM tools.

IV. RESULTS

We polled a focus group of volunteer tutors who did not successfully use AIM in the 98/99 program year. We were able to gather all eight tutors who had not complied with use of the tool, and they were very cooperative in giving us feedback. They let us know that they felt the worksheets were very general and needed to be more specific. It was their opinion that they should have more assistance interpreting these AIM pieces.

Our program improvement team discussed the idea of modifying the worksheets or producing special newsletters for AIM tutors. However, when they followed-up with two members of the focus group, they said that more paper would not have been a help. They felt they needed more personalize assistance.

We did create a two additional modules for AIM tutors which were more detailed than a newsletter would be and distributed it to all AIM tutors. We also recopied the AIM worksheets and created more space for ideas and comments by the tutor/student. We could not significantly modify the worksheets, because the AIM program is the property of the Oregon Dept of Education.

The major strategy we implemented was the use of volunteer mentors to assist a group of AIM tutors. Two volunteer mentors each worked with two AIM tutors to help increase their use of the AIM program module the way it was designed to be utilized. They used mentor journals which I reviewed with them twice during the year to highlight issues and challenges of being a mentor.

Our control group was AIM tutors who received no mentor. There were four tutors in this group. What we discovered was the use of a mentor increased the correct use of the AIM program significantly. In the previous year, two out of ten tutors had completed AIM worksheets and tutoring modules. In the current year, all four tutors who had mentors completed worksheets showing competencies achieved in tutoring their adult literacy student. They also gave increased feedback and were more involved in making suggestions to the staff of the council.

As our control group there were four AIM tutors who received the same training, modules, and worksheets, but they did not have a mentor. Only one tutor continued with the AIM program as a tutoring tool. During the research, we had a tutor leave from the control group, but we were able to match the student within a week or two with another AIM tutor.

Does a mentor provide the support needed to make the AIM program a successful instructional tool for adult literacy students? The research I conducted would show that the use of a

mentor has a definitive affect on compliance when using AIM. It would be interesting to know if the factor was actual mentoring or if the continuous contact and follow-up was an equal factor. The mentors enjoyed being mentors, but commented that it was a substantial commitment. This leads me to believe that if someone were an AIM mentor, they probably should not be an active tutor due to the time factor.

Was the time invested and the effort to create this mentoring system worth the payback? Definitely, doing this project on such a small scale did require additional staff time and effort, but it was workable within the normal job requirements of current staff. If this project were expanded it would take substantial staff hours, but it must also be considered that the idea is to empower others to do the work, i.e. helping tutors instruct better. It takes significantly less time than most follow-up work and it directly affects instruction.

An interesting project would be to compare the mentoring of AIM tutors with general literacy tutors. Does the AIM program lend itself to such strong results because of the structure of competency based instruction or would mentors be able to provide strong support that would help all tutors work more effectively?

It is my opinion that the additional modules and simply modified AIM worksheets were not as effective strategies, because they were just different forms of the same type of training. The mentoring was more personal and hands-on. Literacy tutors often volunteer because they want a more personal experience in their volunteer work.

The effect that the solving of this problem had on our program was the retention of four tutors who were using an instructional method that had proven results. The instructor worked with the students they tutored and these students completed AIM competency sections. This demonstrated that they had achieved improved literacy skills.